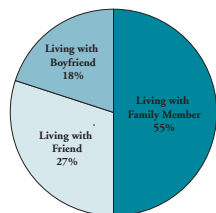


Family homelessness is on the rise in almost every city across the nation, and New Jersey is no different. In Trenton alone, requests for emergency shelter by homeless families with children increased twenty-six percent (26%) in 2001. In late fall of that year, the Institute for Children and Poverty partnered with the New Jersey Alliance for the Homeless to conduct a survey of homeless families in the Garden State. Undertaking a unique effort, the survey considered families currently living in hotels, shelters, and for the first time, those living doubled and tripled-up in the homes of relatives and friends. This report offers a unique snapshot of homelessness at different stages. It describes the varied and complex needs of the New Jersey homeless population and recommends a coordinated response among service providers and policy makers in order to reduce this growing poverty.

## Living on the Couch

The journey into homelessness often begins with the loss of housing for a variety of reasons, and what is hoped to be a temporary stay in the home of a relative or friend. These families living doubled and tripled-up are on the brink of homelessness and currently

Figure 1: Location of Those Living Doubled or Tripled-Up



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, 2001

N=11'

On average, most of these families have been living in their current doubled-up situation for four months or less.

### Who Are The Families Living Doubled or Tripled-Up?

- 67% previously lived in another doubled-up situation.
- 90% have had to move two or more times in the last year.
- 47% sleep on the floor each night.
- 90% plan to leave their situation within one to six month's because of overcrowding.

### What About Their Children?

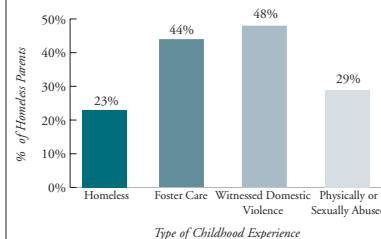
- 60% sleep on the floor or with their parent.
- 20% of the parents report difficulty with school enrollment.
- 33% are enrolled in special education classes.
- 47% changed schools at least once.
- 17% repeated a grade.
- 15% are eating less.
- 31% have asthma.
- 31% have witnessed domestic violence.

live in every county in New Jersey. Each of New Jersey's 21 counties has a different approach to housing homeless families, and a family's location strongly affects where they go for shelter and the services they receive. Without a centralized source of information and services, these families bounce between government offices and social service providers in order to receive assistance. In the end, living doubled or tripled-up is often the precursor to moving into a homeless shelter or welfare hotel for many families.

## Living in a Hotel

Once they have exhausted the hospitality of relatives and friends, most of New Jersey's homeless families turn to the social service system and end up in a welfare hotel. The instability that many of these parents experienced as children has followed them into adulthood. Having less than a high school education, they have a difficult time securing gainful employment. Consequently, almost all of the families living in hotels are receiving public assistance, and in the past year many of them have had their benefits reduced, resulting in their current bout of homelessness. Meanwhile, this residential instability has hurt their children both academically and emotionally.

Figure 2: Childhood Experiences of Homeless Parents Living in Hotels



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, 2001

N=43

Many of the parents who enter welfare hotels experienced emotional as well as residential instability as children.

### Who Are The Homeless Parents Living in Hotels?

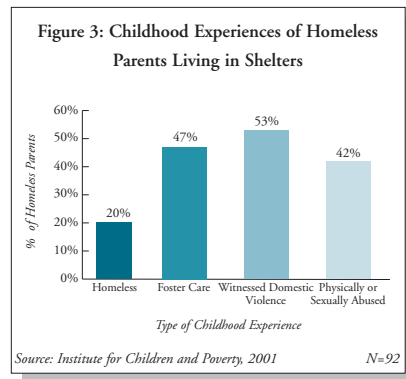
- 60% have not completed high school.
- 14% are currently working.
- 94% are receiving public assistance.
- 43% had their public assistance benefits cut and as a result, 39% became homeless.

### What About Their Children?

- 32% of the parents report difficulty with school enrollment.
- 40% changed schools at least once.
- 17% repeated a grade.
- 35% are eating less.
- 15% have asthma.
- 23% are sick more often.
- 20% have witnessed domestic violence.

### Living in a Family Shelter

Homeless families living in shelters or transitional housing are very similar to those living doubled-up and those residing in welfare hotels. They are young, single parents with no high school education, affected by abuse and domestic violence and have moved from place to place most of their lives. Many of these parents had unstable childhoods growing up and are now in danger of having their own child experience the same. Despite the odds against them, a surprising number of these parents are working and are not lifetime public assistance recipients. However, even with a job these parents are unable to afford rent and find themselves in a shelter.



*In all likelihood, parents living in homeless shelters are still recovering from their own difficult childhoods.*

#### Who Are The Homeless Parents Living in Shelters?

- 46% have not completed high school.
- 29% are currently working.
- 78% are receiving public assistance.
- 45% had their public assistance benefits cut.
- 57% have been homeless more than once.

#### What About Their Children?

- 20% are enrolled in special education classes.
- 45% changed schools at least once.
- 11% repeated a grade.
- 15% are eating less.
- 23% have asthma.
- 24% are sick more often.
- 38% have witnessed domestic violence.

its history of effectively harnessing public assistance funding to deal with the inextricable issue of family homelessness.

Uncoordinated and overwhelmed, New York's shelter system in the early 1980's very much resembled present day homeless services in New Jersey. Since then, the system has been both tiered and centralized. As a result of bold leadership and vision, New York City and New York State built a system tapping into a set of funding streams that remain flexible and responsive to the needs of homeless families. As an example, through a unique partnership of federal, state and city resources, New York City shelters utilize funds, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, to pay for services for the homeless. This balance of resources and responsibility has allowed New York City the flexibility to expand its shelter infrastructure in response to an increasing demand and to meet the growing challenges of this new poverty. In contrast, New Jersey's primary reliance on Emergency Assistance Funding (EAF) fosters an unstable and limited foundation for homeless services.

Many shelters in New Jersey have already begun to take steps in the right direction, but much more needs to be done. Like New York, New Jersey must take on the responsibility of devising a new system of funding that will provide for services that address the immediate needs of homeless families in the most efficient and cost effective way. Moreover, the new system of funding must be able to evolve with the ever-changing federal, state, and city initiatives for the homeless. This will require New Jersey service providers and government officials to view family homelessness in a new way—one that calls for enhanced cooperation, responsibility, political honesty, and ownership. Only then will New Jersey have in place what is needed to support a system that meets the needs of homeless families now and be able to endure the challenges that lie ahead.

#### Notes:

1. The doubled and tripled-up population was surveyed at food pantries and other support programs where families go for assistance. The small sample size is a direct result of individuals' reluctance to identify themselves as doubled or tripled-up.

### A Coordinated Response

This New Jersey snapshot reveals a generation of homeless parents dealing with a lack of education and a legacy of child abuse and instability. Moreover, their situations have only worsened as they struggle to stay afloat in a weak economy. In response, New Jersey homeless service providers must enhance their collaboration and create a coordinated network of resources for homeless families. These families and those on the brink of homelessness are scattered throughout the State, living in a variety of arrangements—doubled/tripled-up, welfare hotels, and shelters. However varied their living situations may be, a common need exists—their need for more than just housing. If New Jersey seeks to reduce family homelessness, it must adopt an approach that will address its underlying causes and coordinate a more comprehensive plan of action that will reach the entire population of homeless families regardless of where they reside. To accomplish this, New Jersey can start by studying its neighbor across the river, New York State, and

The **Institute for Children and Poverty** is an independent research and policy think tank that works in close association with **Homes for the Homeless**. Through the development of effective public policy initiatives and the dissemination of quantitative research findings, the Institute examines and offers unique strategies to combat the impact of homelessness and poverty on the lives of children and their families.

**Homes for the Homeless (HFH)** is a private, non-profit organization based in New York City that operates American Family Inns. Since 1986, HFH has worked to break the cycle of poverty and dependence among homeless families through education-based services.

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